

Opening the Gate for Reading Instruction

"The two best predictors of early reading success are alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness."

—Marilyn Jager Adams

The birth of my nephew, Trevor, was arguably the most exciting day in my family's history. After Trevor was born, my family and I spent the next five years singing the alphabet song to him; reading to him countless ABC, board, and picture books; praising his efforts to make sense of print ("Yes, Trevor, those golden arches do mean 'yummy burgers.'"); and sitting him in front of the television every time *Sesame Street* came on—all in an attempt to get him "ready" for school. Trevor's development was the topic of many discussions between my sister and me. "Am I reading to him enough?" my sister would ask. "Should I be doing more? Will he *really* be ready?" We waited to see if the seemingly hundreds of hours we spent getting him "ready" for school would pay off.

While my nephew did seem to benefit from our efforts, too many children enter school each year with limited exposures to books, small speaking and listening vocabularies, varied world knowledge, and only a vague sense of story. Yet it's the task of each kindergarten teacher to get all these children—those from both print-rich and print-poor environments—ready for formal reading instruction.

Powerful Predictors of Success

How can teachers ensure that all students are "ready" for formal reading instruction? And what are the essential prerequisites for learning to read? Two powerful predictors of early reading success are **alphabet recognition** (knowing the names of the letters and the sounds they represent) and **phonemic awareness** (understanding that a word is made up of sounds and the ability to manipulate sounds in spoken words) (Adams, 1990; Stanovich, 1992; Chall, 1996; Beck and Juel, 1995). In essence, these two skills open the gate for early reading. Without a thorough knowledge of letters and an understanding that words are made up of sounds, children cannot learn to read.

In addition to alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness, reading-ready children need to have a sense of story and a basic understanding of the concepts of print and a firm grasp of the language of instruction.

The Concepts of Print: These concepts, also referred to as print awareness, include making sure children:

- ◆ know the difference between words and non-words.
- ◆ know that print is print no matter what form it appears in (uppercase, lowercase, manuscript, cursive, different fonts, different colors and sizes).
- ◆ know that print can appear by itself or with pictures.
- ◆ understand that print corresponds to speech, word for word.
- ◆ understand the purpose of the empty space between words (word boundaries).
- ◆ understand that words are read from left to right on a page.
- ◆ understand that lines of text are read from top to bottom on a page.
- ◆ can identify the front of a book and a page in it.

The Language of Instruction: This includes an understanding of the following terms: *word, letter, beginning, middle, end, base line, sentence, period, comma, question mark, sound, and syllable.*

- ◆ Tracking print can help children develop the concept of "word."
- ◆ Using sentence strips and pocket charts to have children match sentences with a given text can develop the concept of "sentence."
- ◆ Activities such as the following can help children understand the concept of "beginning, middle, and end."



Classroom Spotlight

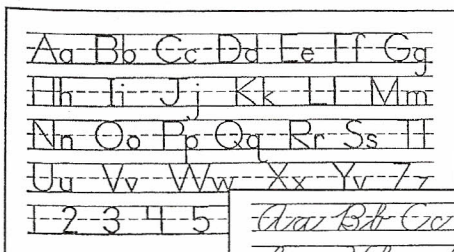
Do these activities in the order they are given.

- ◆ Place three books in a row on the chalkboard ledge. Point out that the first book is at the beginning of the row, the second book is in the middle of the row, and the third book is at the end of the row. Ask a volunteer to identify the book at the beginning of the row. Continue with other positions and classroom objects.
- ◆ Arrange three students at the front of the room. Ask the class which student is at the beginning, middle, or end of the row.
- ◆ Write a three-letter word such as *sat* on the chalkboard. Ask a volunteer to circle the beginning letter in the word. Continue with other words and letter positions.

Alphabet Recognition: What It Is and Why It's Essential

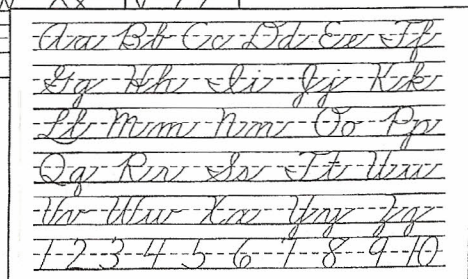
English, like French, Spanish, and many other languages, is an alphabetic language. The invention of the alphabet is often said to be the most important invention in the social history of the world (Adams, 1990). It enabled people to communicate across places and times and to store those communications. However, the alphabet is of a series of abstract symbols that by themselves are mere squiggles and lines. Identities and sounds have been attached to these symbols to give them purpose and utility. Together, they create something spectacular—printed words.

To read in any alphabetic language, students have to learn the intricacies of that alphabet and to understand the alphabetic principle (that is, that this system of letters stands for a series of sounds). Students have to be able to recognize letters in their many contexts and forms. In fact, a



Zaner-Bloser

The two most common letter “styles” taught today are Zaner-Bloser and D’Nealian.



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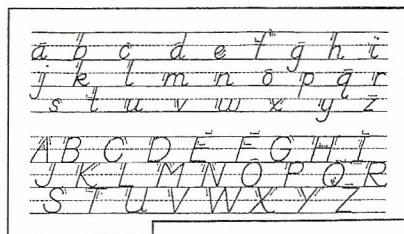
child must memorize four sets of letters: upper-case manuscript, lowercase manuscript, upper-case cursive, and lowercase cursive.

In addition to learning these four forms of each letter, children need to learn to distinguish among similar-looking letters. For example, the letter *E* looks a lot like the letter *F*; the letter *d* looks like a flipped version of the letter *b*. The *d/b* distinction is particularly confusing for children because this is the first time they encounter the orientation of something changing its identity. Up until now, when children saw a pen it was always a pen no matter how it was turned, flipped, or moved around. However, if we flip a *b* it is now called a *d*; if we flip an *M* it is now called a *W*. Learning these subtle differences in letters requires time, practice, and careful visual attention.

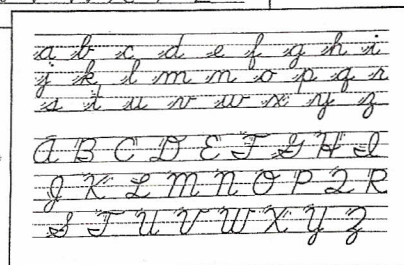
Letters can be distinguished according to their position on a line; their length; their size; whether they contain horizontal, vertical, diagonal, or curving lines; whether they have descenders (parts of the letter that extend below the base line); and their orientation. It was once believed that children who confused visually similar letters were at serious risk for reading disabilities. However, it is now generally agreed that children who have a problem with letter orientation probably just lack letter knowledge. Training and increased exposure will help them overcome most of these difficulties.

Beyond "Now I Know My ABC's"

Most children enter school being able to say the alphabet, having acquired the skill by about age four. However, being able to say the names of the letters is not the same as “knowing” the letters. In order to learn to read, children must also be able to identify the printed forms of the letters in and out of sequence and learn the most frequent sound that is attached to each letter. Instruction



D'Nealian



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during the first two years of school should ensure that children know the alphabet and can use it with ease and efficiency.

Many children enter school already able to identify some of the printed letter names. In one study, children entering kindergarten could identify on average 14 letters (Hiebert and Sawyer, 1984). The letters the children were most likely to know were those used most frequently or those with the most personal relevance to them (for example, the letters in their name). These children had learned letters by singing the alphabet song, being exposed to alphabet books, and having family members point out and identify letters in environmental print.

However, being able to name and quickly recognize letters is a critical step to learning to read for *all* children. Adams (1990) points out that:

- ◆ Children who can recognize letters with accuracy and speed have an easier time learning about the sounds associated with letters than those children who are struggling with alphabet recognition. Automatic recognition frees up students' "mental energies" so they can focus on learning sound-spelling relationships.
- ◆ Accuracy is only one aspect of alphabet recognition. Speed (automaticity) is another critical factor. Both accuracy and speed indicate how well children have learned the letters' identities. Thus, children need to overlearn (memorize) the letters. A child who hasn't memorized the letters of the alphabet may become a "nonalphabetic" reader; that is, he or she will have to rely on sight words to read rather than using a knowledge of letters and the sounds they represent.
- ◆ As they learn the letters, children frequently become interested in learning more about them—their sounds and how to use them to write words.

How to Assess Alphabet Recognition

Assess children's knowledge of the alphabet at the beginning of kindergarten and grade one. Begin any assessment by asking children to say the names of the uppercase and lowercase alphabet letters. Then continue by asking them to identify the letters in and out of sequence. See the next page for some appropriate assessments.

Teaching Alphabet Recognition

Teachers all across the country use a wide range of methods and activities to teach the alphabet. Jill Simpson, teaching in Florida, reads a lot of alphabet books to her students and has them cre-

ate their own alphabet books as she introduces each new letter. Sadie Connor in Ohio fills her classroom with manipulatives—fuzzy letters, paint, letter cards, and more. She also sings the alphabet song every morning and designates a letter of the day that corresponds to a child's name in her class. Her activities for the day center around that letter and its corresponding sound. Matt Bingham in Maryland has his students write letters in the air, form letters with their bodies, make letters out of clay, and practice writing letters while writing stories. He stresses the sound that each letter stands for by introducing his class to an object (toy, classroom object, etc.) whose name contains the letter/sound being studied. His children then write about that object.

What do all these teachers have in common? They all understand that children learn the alphabet best through the "active exploration of the relationships between letter names, the sounds of the letter names, their visual characteristics, and the motor movement involved in their formation" (Bear et al., 1996). Educators agree that children learn these relationships through a combination of direct instruction and multiple exposures to print. However, there is some disagreement about the sequence in which the alphabet should be taught. Some educators believe that the letters should be taught in order, since the alphabet represents a system with a set sequence that serves a valuable organizational function. And they emphasize the importance of starting with the known when teaching any new skill. Since most children come to school able to sing the alphabet song—with the letters in order—these educators reason that learning the printed forms of the letters in the same order will be easier.

Other educators believe that children should first learn meaningful letters, such as those in their names. Since these letters are of greatest importance, they reason, young learners will internalize them more quickly. In addition, these educators think that the visually confusing letters, such as *b* and *d*, should be taught far enough apart that one can be learned before the other is introduced.

Sensible Sequencing

Since there is no consensus on a best sequence for teaching the alphabet, you'll have to decide what is best for you and your students. I recommend the following:

- ◆ **Teach children letter names first.** Most letter names are closely related to their sounds. In fact, 21 letters contain the most common sound assigned to them in their names. For example, *b* (/bē/) and *m* (/em/). The exceptions are *h*, *q*, *w*,

Alphabet Recognition Assessment

Name _____ Date _____

Uppercase letters

Have the child point to each letter in order as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R
S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z	

Lowercase letters

Have the child point to each letter in order as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

a	b	c	d	e	f	g	h	i
j	k	l	m	n	o	p	q	r
s	t	u	v	w	x	y	z	

Upper/lowercase letter match

Have the child draw lines to match the uppercase and lowercase letters in each box.

A	c	B	d	H	h	P	r	K	o	M	x
C	v	D	f	I	l	Q	z	O	k	N	y
G	a	E	e	J	i	R	q	S	t	W	w
V	u	F	b	L	j	Z	p	T	s	X	n
U	g									Y	m

Upper/lowercase random order mix

Have the child point to each uppercase or lowercase letter as he or she says the letter's name. Circle those that the child gets correct.

E	B	o	h	P	f	N	x	I
a	q	G	m	R	L	j	v	K
U	c	Z	W	d	T	y	s	

y, g, and the short vowels. Knowing the names of the letters helps children grasp the alphabetic principle—the notion that each letter stands for a sound. In addition, knowing the names provides you with instructional labels that are familiar to children.

- ◆ **Put a new spin on a classic song.** Children generally learn the letter names not by seeing the letters but by singing the “Alphabet Song” to the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.” Although a classic, the traditional alphabet song isn’t without its shortcomings—most notably the so-called elemeno problem. When the song arrives at the letters L, M, N, and O, they are sung so quickly that they sound like the word “elemeno” instead of the pronunciations of four distinct letters. You can overcome this problem by choosing a different version of the alphabet song, or pointing to the letters on an alphabet chart while singing the song. Alternate versions are available on audiocassette and range from slight modifications of the traditional song (for example, one uses the traditional tune but provides pauses on the letters N, Q, and T) to an alphabet rap. Also available are alphabet book/cassette combinations, such as *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (written by Bill Martin, Jr. and John Archambault; performed by Ray Charles, Simon & Schuster, 1991).

- ◆ **Next, teach the shapes and sounds of letters.** When children know the names of the letters, teach their shapes and the most common sound assigned to each. Although many children can say the names of the letters by age four, most need up to two years to learn the corresponding shapes (Adams, 1990). Some children can learn several letters a week; some may need a week to learn one (Ekwall and Shanker, 1993). “Learning the alphabet proceeds in much the same way as learning anything else—by categorizing features that are the same and contrasting those with other features that are different” (Bear et al., 1996).

- ◆ **Tailor your letter lessons to students’ needs.** If you’re working with children who have limited alphabet knowledge, don’t teach both the uppercase and lowercase forms of the letters simultaneously. If children are in preschool, teach the uppercase letters first since those are easier to distinguish visually. Besides, these are the letter forms preschool children are most likely to have become familiar with outside the classroom because of their exposure to environmental print. If you are working with children in kindergarten and grade one, focus on the lower-

case letters since these are the letter forms most frequently encountered in text (Adams, 1990).

- ◆ **Help children to see differences and similarities among letters.** When teaching letter shapes, help children to discriminate small, but important, differences among letters. And remember that children need to be able to recognize letters in isolation and in the context of a word, the latter being more difficult (Clay, 1991). First help children see similarities in letters they know; then progress to pointing out letter differences and introducing other letters. For example, the letters *a* and *b* both contain small circles. Next point out and discuss the subtle differences among similar-looking letters. For example letters differ in the direction of their extension (*b-p*, *d-g*, *q-d*), their left-right orientation (*b-d*, *q-p*, *g-p*), their top-bottom orientation (*m-w*, *n-u*, *M-W*), and their line-curve features (*u-v*, *U-V*).

The following charts show letters that are visually similar and often confused by children. You need to pay special attention to teaching their differences. Don’t teach these letter pairs in close proximity; be sure children have a firm grasp of the first one before you introduce the other. The letters that confuse children the most are those with reversible parts, such as *b-d*, *p-d*, *q-b*, *h-u*, and *i-l* (Popp, 1964).

Confusable Letter Pairs

Lowercase				Uppercase	
a-d	c-o	h-n	n-u	C-G	M-N
a-o	d-q	h-u	p-q	D-O	M-W
b-d	d-g	i-j	u-v	E-F	O-Q
b-h	d-p	i-l	v-w	I-J	P-R
b-p	f-t	k-y	v-y	I-L	U-V
b-q	g-p	m-n		K-X	V-Y
c-e	g-q	m-w		L-T	

The following four letter groups are particularly confusing for students and shouldn’t be taught at the same time (Manzo and Manzo, 1993).

- ◆ e, a, s, c, o
- ◆ b, d, p, o, g, h
- ◆ f, l, t, k, i, h
- ◆ n, m, u, h, r

- ◆ **Provide support for children having difficulty discriminating letters.** The typical four- to four-and-a-half-year-old has the visual perceptual skill needed to distinguish lowercase letters (Rosner, 1993). However, some children will need extra help. One common letter reversal problem involves *b* and *d*. Most children who have trouble identifying *b* and *d* can see that the letters are different, but they can't remember which is which (Rosner, 1993). Using memory devices and having an alphabet chart on each child's desk for easy reference helps.



Classroom Spotlight

You can use memory devices to help children distinguish one letter from another. Try these strategies to help children with the visually confusing *b-d*.

- ◆ Write the word *bed* on the chalkboard and point out that the word visually resembles a bed. Show children that the word begins with the letter *b* and ends with the letter *d* and that the letter *b* comes before the letter *d* in the alphabet and in the word *bed*.
- ◆ Write an uppercase *B* on the chalkboard. In another color, trace the lowercase *b* that is "hidden" (embedded) in the uppercase *B*. For the letter *d*, teach the letter *c* first. Then point out to children that they need only add a line to the letter *c* to form the next letter in the alphabet—the letter *d*.

- ◆ **Provide letter-writing practice.** To learn and recall the letter shapes, children need plenty of practice writing them as early as possible. Teach letter shapes along with teaching hand-writing. If a child hasn't chosen which hand to write with (usually a preference emerges by age four), determine it now. To remember the intricacies of letter orientation, children should keep writing the letters with the same hand.

"Having children write the letters accurately, especially with encouragement to attend to their distinctive features, significantly helps letter recognition" (Clay, 1993). When teaching handwriting, be consistent. Choose only one style of manuscript. The two most common styles currently in use are Zaner-Bloser, which is characterized by straight lines and sharp edges, and D'Nealian, which is characterized by slanted lines and tails resulting in a close resemblance between its manuscript and cursive forms. Let children write the letters on unlined paper before they encounter the greater demands of lined paper. Be sure to spend adequate time helping them develop proper habits in forming the necessary line and curve strokes.

- ◆ **Use memory devices to help children write letters.** Memory devices can help children learn and remember each letter's distinguishing features. One commercially-available program (*Scholastic Spelling*, 1998) employs clever rhymes. For example:

For teaching E:

Pull straight down, just like me. (*Pull down straight.*)

Then slide to the right: one, two, three. (*Pull across from left to right three times.*)

For teaching g:

There's a gopher in my garden,
See him going round. (*Half-circle up and left.*)
Oops! Now the gopher sees me,
And he pops down in the ground! (*Pull down straight. Curve up left.*)

- ◆ **Use copying and tracing appropriately.** Independent writing is the most effective way of teaching children to form the shapes of each letter. But copying and tracing have their place. Having children write the letter while saying its name, and/or the sound associated with it, ensures that they are focusing on the subtle differences in each letter and thinking about it in terms of its name and/or sound. Copying and tracing also help to develop children's fine-motor skills. So emphasize independent writing and use copying and tracing according to each child's needs.



Classroom Spotlight

You may need to help children who are having difficulties forming letters by holding the pencil with them and guiding them to form the letter. Think aloud about how you are forming the letter, discussing the unique visual characteristics of the letter. You may want to have children whose manual dexterity is developing more slowly write on unlined paper. For one of my second graders who was having trouble fitting his letters on lined paper, I enlarged the paper on the photocopy machine. That way I could teach him how to use the base line and dashed lines as guides for correctly forming letters and still accommodate his inability to write letters in that small a space.

- ◆ **Use key words and pictures when you introduce sound-spelling relationships.** After you teach the names of the letters (and possibly the shapes) in sequence, teach the most common sound-spelling relationship for each. Use a sequence that will allow you to form simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words early on and model the principle of blending. Starting in kindergarten,

children need to be shown how their letter knowledge applies to the actual reading of words. To help students see this, associate a key word and picture with each letter. For example, when teaching the letter *s*, you might use the word *sun* and a corresponding picture of a sun. Research has shown this letter/key word/key picture combination to be highly effective (Ehri, 1992). You'll find a listing of key words and pictures for each letter in the "Learning About Sounds and Letters" section (page 43) of this book.

- ◆ **Adjust the pace of instruction according to students' needs.** Children who have a limited alphabet knowledge upon entering school may have trouble gaining the all-important alphabet recognition skills through the traditional "letter a week" method. Without the necessary memorization, early reading instruction becomes cumbersome and difficult. As Adams (1990) writes, "For children who haven't cut their teeth on alphabet letters and picture books, one letter per week is a mere drop in the bucket against the 1,000 to 1,700 hour advantage of their peers." For these children, you'll have to provide lots of extra practice saying the names and identifying the shapes of the uppercase and lowercase letters in and out of sequence as you introduce sound-spelling relationships.
- ◆ **Include multisensory activities.** You'll find tactile (touch), visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (movement) activities for teaching the alphabet on pages 24–27. Remember to include letter recognition activities throughout your daily instruction. For example, point out target letters while reading a Big Book and look for letters in environmental print.
- ◆ **Read a lot of alphabet books.** Provide opportunities for children to hear, see, say, and write the alphabet in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes.

An Alphabet-Recognition Timetable

The following benchmarks can be used to monitor students' progress in alphabet recognition (Honig, 1996).

Preschool

- ◆ Child has been exposed to the letter names.
- ◆ Child can recognize his or her name in print.

Kindergarten

- ◆ Child knows most letter names.
- ◆ Child recognizes most letter shapes (upper- and lowercase)

Grade 1 (Fall)

- ◆ Child knows all letter names and shapes.

Alphabet Books Play a Role

Alphabet books, those popular picture books that present the letters of the alphabet in order, fill elementary classrooms everywhere. Many alphabet books center around a common kid-pleasing theme or concept, such as animal alphabet or city alphabet. You can use alphabet books to develop alphabet recognition and to build vocabulary. Some of the books, such as *Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions* by M. Musgrove, promote multicultural awareness.

Alphabet books are valuable because:

- ◆ they support beginning readers' oral language development.
- ◆ they help children learn letter sequence.
- ◆ they help children associate a sound with a letter.
- ◆ they can help children build vocabulary and world knowledge. Children's knowledge of the world, referred to as "semantic domain" (Lindfors, 1987), grows substantially during the elementary school years. Alphabet books can be extremely beneficial for children with limited world knowledge.
- ◆ they can be vocabulary builders for students learning English as a second language.
- ◆ they are appealing to at-risk readers who might be intimidated by books containing denser text.

Tips for Teaching with Alphabet Books

Here are some suggestions for using alphabet books as part of your weekly instruction.

- ◆ Read the book the first time in its entirety, without pauses, so children can enjoy the language and illustrations.
- ◆ Reread the book and discuss items of interest, such as finding the objects in the illustration that begin with the sound the letter on that page represents. Keep the discussion playful and gamelike, limiting the letters you focus on to one or two each day.
- ◆ Create letter charts, using the words and pictures in the alphabet book. Have children identify words and pictures with a target letter/sound to add to each chart.
- ◆ Have children create their own alphabet books using the pattern of the book you just read.

For additional alphabet books, see J. H. Chaney, "Alphabet Books: Resources for Learning." *The Reading Teacher* 47 no. 2 (1993): 96–104.

35 Quick-and-Easy Activities for Developing Alphabet Recognition

Use these games and activities as warm-ups for the day's formal reading instruction. Many also work well for learning centers. I suggest keeping a learning center chart on which you mark the centers each child has visited. I replace the games the first day of each month so that children have many opportunities to play them all. Display an alphabet chart on a classroom wall for students' reference as they use the games and activities to reinforce their alphabet skills.

1 Alphabet Corner

Set up an alphabet corner in your classroom. Stock it with letters to trace, plastic letters for word building, alphabet stamps, alphabet puzzles and games, picture cards, alphabet books from your library, materials to make letters (pipe cleaners, glue, stencils), alphabet flash cards, dry-erase boards or minichalkboards, alphabet cassettes and cassette player, clay, paints, and any other materials you want to include. Allow children time to explore and use the materials in the Alphabet Corner throughout the week.

2 Alphabet Concentration

This classic game can be played with almost any skill. Limiting the game to 8-12 cards, make a set of letter cards—one letter to a card, two cards for each letter. Place the cards facedown on the desk, table, or floor. Have children turn over two cards at a time. If the cards match, children keep them. The object of the game is to make as many matches as possible. You can have children match uppercase letters only, lowercase letters only, or a mix of upper- and lowercase letters.

3 Touch It

Provide each letter being studied in a variety of forms (magnetic, foam, and sandpaper letters) for children to trace. To give children a fun way to form their own letters, place hair styling gel (add food coloring to clear gel) in small plastic bags that can be zipped shut. Children will delight in forming the letter they're learning by writing it with their fingers on the outside of the bag. They can then "erase" the letter and continue with other letters.

4 Name Scramble

Have children use letter cards to spell their names. Then have them scramble the cards and reform their names. Next have each child ask a classmate to unscramble his or her name. Make sure the student's name card is on the desk for reference. When the name is formed, ask the student to identify each letter in the classmate's name. TIP: Some children might need a support clue to help them remember the correct orientation of each letter. For them, draw a small red dot in the upper right-hand corner of each letter card. Point out that this dot tells where the top of the letter card is.

5 Sign Up

To practice writing letters, have children write their names on a large sheet of paper when you take attendance, when they sign out a book from the classroom library, or when they get a restroom pass. Or ask children to write the "letter of the day" on a large sheet of paper for some predetermined purpose such as lining up for lunch. Provide crayons and markers of many colors. Collect the pages to form an alphabet Big Book.

6 Match It

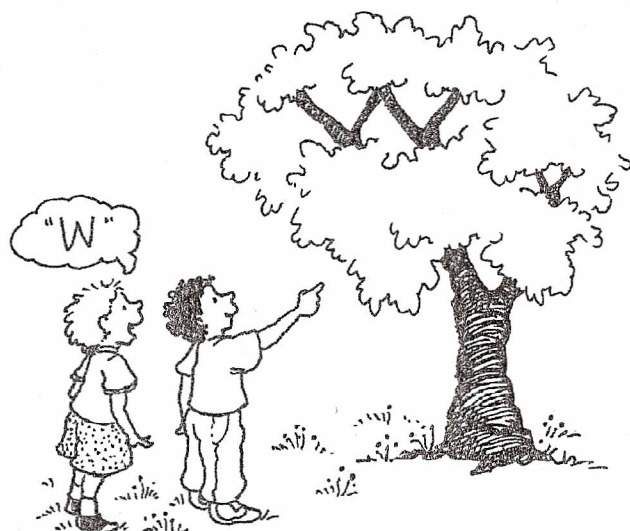
Distribute letters cards, one card per student. Then write a letter on the chalkboard. Ask the children whose cards match the letter to step to the front of the classroom. Have a volunteer name the letter and review the sound that the letter represents. Provide feedback such as "That's right. That's the letter s as in sun. It stands for the /s/ sound."

7 Singled Out

Write on the chalkboard a CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) word that children have recently encountered in a story. Say the name of one letter in the word and invite a volunteer to circle that letter. Review the sound that the letter stands for. Ask children if it is the beginning, middle, or ending sound in the word

8 Let's Go on a Hunt

Write the upper- and lowercase forms of each letter on large note cards. Distribute one note card to each child. Have children find their letter in magazines and newspapers. Suggest that they cut them out and paste them to the back of the card. They might also want to add pictures whose names begin with the sound that the letter represents.



9 Alphabet Walk

Take children on a walk around the school or neighborhood. Have them look for, and identify, learned letters in environmental print.

10 Round 'em Up

Write a letter on the chalkboard in red or some other distinguishing color. Then write a series of letters beside it in yellow or white chalk. Many of the letters should be the same as the one written in red. Ask volunteers to circle the letters that are the same as the one in red. As each letter is circled, have the class state the name of the letter. Finally, have the class count the number of letters circled.

EXAMPLE: s s t s s s m s

11 Word Roundup

Write a series of simple words on the chalkboard. Most of the words should begin with the same sound. Read the words aloud. Then have volunteers circle the words that begin with the same letter.

EXAMPLE: sat sun sad top sick mop

12 Word Pairs

Write a word pair on the chalkboard, such as *sat* and *mat*. Read the words aloud. Ask children to identify the letter that is different in each word.

13 Hide-and-Seek

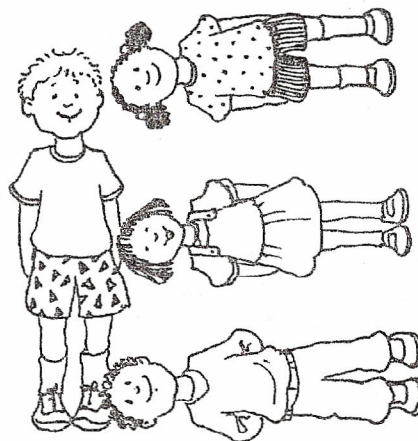
Hide letter cards throughout the classroom. Have children search the room for them. When each child has found a card, he or she can return to his or her seat. Then have children share the letter on the card they found as they write it on the chalkboard.

14 Through-the-Year Alphabet Book

Have the children use large sheets of colored construction paper to create a personal alphabet book throughout the year. They should write the upper- and lowercase form of each letter on one page, then paste or draw pictures of objects whose names begin with the sound the letter stands for and add words that begin with that letter.

15 Body Letters

Divide the class into groups of three to five students. Assign each group a letter to form with their bodies. They might form the letter individually (each child forming it), or use the entire group to form it (four children might lie on the floor to form the letter *E*).



16 Letter Path

Create a construction paper “stone” path around the classroom with one letter written on each stone. Laminate the stones for durability. Have children “walk” the alphabet each day, saying aloud each letter name.

Variation: As you call letters, have children stand on the appropriate stones.

17 Disappearing Letters

Using a small, wet sponge, write a letter on the chalkboard. Challenge children to identify the letter before it disappears. Have the children sponge on letters for classmates to identify.

18 Letter Snacks

As you introduce a letter, choose a snack whose name begins with or contains the sound the letter stands for. This yummy treat will serve as a memory device to help children to associate the letter with its sound. Following are snack possibilities for most of the letters. NOTE: Choose whether you will introduce the long- or short-vowel sounds first and be consistent with your snacks. You might have to choose snacks with the vowel sound in the middle of its word.

apples/cake	milk
bananas	noodles/nachos
carrots/cookies	oatmeal cookies
donuts	pizza/peaches
eggs/green beans	raisins
fish crackers	soup/salad
gum	toast/tacos
hamburgers	upside-down cake
ice cream, dip	vegetables
Jell-O™/juice	watermelon
Kool-aid™	yogurt
lemonade	zucchini bread

19 Alphabet Partner

Divide the number of children in your classroom in half. Use this number to determine the number of letters you will use to make a letter card set. The letter card set should contain two cards for each letter—one uppercase, one lowercase. Then give each child a card. Have children find their upper- or lowercase match.

20 Tongue Depressor Alphabets

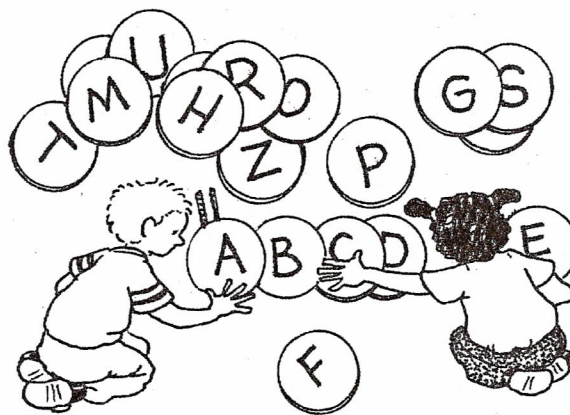
On each of a set of tongue depressors write one letter. Have children arrange the tongue depressors in alphabetical order.

Variation: Write words for children to alphabetize

on the tongue depressors.

21 Alphabet Caterpillar

Students will have fun creating this letter-perfect creature. Write each letter of the alphabet on a paper circle. Mix the circles and spread them out on the table or floor. Have children work in pairs or small groups to form the caterpillar by placing its body parts (circles) in alphabetical order. Attach antennae to the *A* circle for the caterpillar's head.



22 Connect the Dots

Gather pages of connect-the-dot pictures from children's activity books and laminate them. Children can use a wipe-off marker to connect the dots and form the picture.

Variations: (1) Make multiple copies of each page to keep in a learning center. (2) Create your own connect-the-dot pictures by lightly tracing over pictures in workbooks or coloring books with a pencil and placing dots at intervals along the outline with a pen or marker. Then assign a letter to each dot in the order it should be connected. Add any connecting lines, such as curves, necessary to complete the picture, erase your tracing, and photocopy the page.

23 Letter Pop-Up

Distribute letter cards, one or two per child. Call out a letter. The children holding that letter's cards should pop up from their seats and hold up their cards so you can quickly check for accuracy.

24 Moon and Stars

Using construction paper, cut out 26 stars and 26 crescent moons. On each moon, write an uppercase letter. On each star, write a lowercase letter. Have children match the moons and stars.

Variation: Use other objects that might go together—chicken and egg, dog and doghouse, leaf and tree.

25 Special Name Day

Write children's names on note cards and place them in a decorated box or can. Each day, choose one name, which will be the "special name of the day." Spend time having the class identify each letter in the chosen name, write the name on a sheet of paper, group the name with names selected from previous days (for example, by first letter, by boy and girl names, and so on), clap the number of syllables in the name, add the name to a name book organized in alphabetical order, and count the number of letters in the name.

26 Play with Names

Have children write their names in various ways. For example, ask them to write their names using only uppercase letters, using pipe cleaners and glue, or using clay.

27 ABC Time

Distribute a set of letter cards, one card per student. Say a series of three or four letters. Have the children holding a matching letter card come to the front of the classroom as their letters are called. Then have the group of three to four children holding the cards place themselves in alphabetical order. The rest of the class can offer feedback and determine the group's accuracy.

28 Word Wheel

Create a spinning wheel using two cardboard circles of different sizes and a brass fastener. On the outside of one wheel (circle) write the uppercase letters; on the other write the lowercase letters. Then punch a hole in the center of each wheel and attach them using the fastener. Children will spin the wheel to match upper- and lowercase letters.

29 Classroom Labels

As you teach each letter of the alphabet, add labels to objects in your classroom whose names begin with the sound the letter stands for. Invite volunteers to suggest objects to label.

30 Alphabet Spin

Write the uppercase letters on a spinner and the lowercase letters on note cards, one to a card. Have small groups of children take turns spinning the spinner, identifying the letter, and finding the letter match in the card pile. Use a timer to make the game more engaging. Decrease the amount of time allowed to find the matching card after each round.

31 Alphabet Tic-Tac-Toe

This form of Tic-Tac-Toe is played like the regular game—with one exception. Here, each child is assigned a different letter. Pairs of students play the game using their assigned letters. When most pairs have finished, assign new letters and continue play.

32 Alphabet Book Tape

Make a tape recording of an alphabet book to place in a learning center or take-home activity pack. After reading the text for each page (or series of pages), give activity directions ("Find the letter *s* on page 22. Point to it and say *s*. Write the letter with your finger. Next, find the picture of the sun. The word *sun* begins with the letter *s*. The letter *s* stands for the /s/ sound. Say /s/. That's right—ssssssss!")

33 Newspaper Search

Distribute a few pages of an old newspaper to each child and assign each a letter. Have the child circle the letter every time it appears on the page. You might want to have children stop after finding five occurrences of the letter.

The blockbuster quality is still there. A huge pile of red silk flowers dominates the stage. When the entire hall is pushed perilously close to the audience in pursuit of a man who escapes up the aisle, the effect is as amazing as when a geyser of flowers becomes the visual equivalent of the fireworks.

34 Letter Actions

Teach children an action for each letter they learn. As you introduce the letter, model the action and have children perform it. In later weeks, tell children you will hold up a letter card, and they should perform the action associated with the letter shown. Here are some possible actions (Cunningham, 1995).

All the Right Moves

bounce	hop	nod	vacuum
catch	jump	paint	walk
dance	kick	run	yawn
fall	laugh	sit	zip
gallop	march	talk	

35 Alphabet Cereal Sort

Place a pile of alphabet cereal on a napkin on each child's desk. Give children time to sort the cereal letters. Have them count the number of times they found each letter. Use these tallies to create a class chart. Children will enjoy a tasty letter treat when the activity is completed.